

19.11.24

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.  
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;  
God will help it when the morning dawns.  
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;  
he utters his voice, the earth melts.  
The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Come, behold the works of the Lord;  
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.  
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;  
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.  
'Be still, and know that I am God!  
I am exalted among the nations,  
I am exalted in the earth.'  
The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Luke 1: 68-80 Zechariah's prophecy of John the Baptist

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.  
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,  
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.  
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,  
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.  
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.  
By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

SERMON:

Before Cathy reads the scripture for this morning, I want to set the stage. I invite you to imagine you're there, there being the year zero, Palestine, in a small town, outside the synagogue. You're one of the community of faith gathered around Elizabeth, Zechariah, and their 8 day old son. You might close your eyes, allowing yourself to be immersed in the time and space of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Here they are, here we are, gathering to celebrate the circumcision of this unnamed child. Imagine that you're one of the people of the synagogue, gathered outside, waiting for it to begin. You might feel the heat of the sun beating down on you, sense the dust on your feet, hear the sound of others coming alongside you, the distant laughter of children playing nearby. What might you smell? The sweat of hard labor... there's a whiff of the lamb stew Elizabeth has prepared to share together after the circumcision. Oh that smells good. Yes, we've gathered - It's a time of joy, welcoming this child to parents who never expected, in their old age, to conceive and bear a son. It's a time of whispering - remembering how Zech was struck speechless 9 months ago when he last served in the temple? What does it all mean? Joy and questions surround this sacred ritual of marking this child as a follower of God. Imagine yourself here. Just moments ago Eliz, the child's mother, said he is to be called John, going against the counsel of the elders. And then, after an entire gestation of angelic imposed silence, Z. writes: His name is John, after which the dam that held back the words for so long is burst and Z starts praising God. And you, here in the crowd, are saying to one another: What then will this child become? Take in the scene in your mind's eye, and as we listen, imagine Z gazing at his infant son tucked in the crook of his arms, filled with the Holy Spirit prophesying:

*(Scripture is read)*

John starts out his life hearing the first words uttered from his father's mouth to be a blessing and a calling for what his life will be.

And you, child,... will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people...,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

Zechariah shares with his infant son, with the boy's mother and with his faith community, the prophetic call from God that defines this infant of his, from his very beginning.

You, you my young son, you will go before the Lord to give knowledge of salvation, to give light to those in darkness, to guide our feet in the way of peace.

Our passage ends with a brief summary of the next decades of John's life, it reads: the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

When we meet John again he's a grizzled ascetic preaching of the wrath of God to come. What happens to John out in the wilderness? In his own unique way, John has accepted the call of God which was bestowed on him by his father, Zechariah.

I recently started using a computer app for reading the bible in a year, which at this point in time puts us in the book of Ezekiel. Earlier was Jeremiah.... These prophets had some rough news to deliver. I imagine they may have spent lots of time wandering in the wilderness, listening for the word of God, being tested by the elements and wild beasts. Being a prophet was not an easy job, not one most would willingly sign up for. The prophets told of ways the people had forsaken God and announced the coming

repercussions of their sins. Prophets were often hunted down, their lives threatened for the message they proclaimed. John is being prepared to take on this prophetic task. We know what happens to him. Living out one's call is not easy business. No, living out our call usually requires time in the wilderness.

I found myself returning to a passage from a familiar book this week that speaks to the challenge of following our call, for in some ways, I think following our call requires picking up our cross and heading into the unknown. Sometimes we actively pray to understand God's call, sometimes it's thrust upon us - just as John was blessed with his calling at the beginning of his life.

So this morning I bring a piece from the book, *The Fellowship of the Ring* - the first part of the Lord of the Rings series, by JRR Tolkien. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* was published in 1937, with this, his next book about this magical world, coming out 17 years later, in 1954.

For those who aren't familiar with these books -

In the first book, *The Hobbit*, the main character, Bilbo Baggins lives a simple life with his fellow hobbits in the shire, until the wizard Gandalf arrives and convinces him to join a group of dwarves on a quest. The journey takes Bilbo on a path through treacherous lands swarming with dangers of all sorts where he accidentally finds a gold ring that is tied to the fate of Middle Earth in ways Bilbo cannot even fathom.

That's the backdrop for the *Fellowship of the Ring*, where Bilbo's nephew and heir, Frodo, receives a "call" to destroy the powerfully evil ring before its power is able to corrupt and destroy all of Middle Earth. This call involves a long and extremely dangerous journey, and the likelihood that Frodo will not return alive. In one scene, Frodo expresses his fear and his wish that the ring had never come to him. This wish that he had not received a call, that life would be easy, quiet, return to the normal he

once knew. Gandalf the wizard tells Frodo, "We cannot choose the time we live in. We can only choose what we do with the time we are given."<sup>1</sup>

*(watch clip of movie)*

*"We cannot choose the time we live in. We can only choose what we do with the time we are given."*

We might not have such epic journeys thrust on us, but many in this congregation have stepped out into new lands, new places, with twists, turns, dangers and experiences we never imagined. But how about now, at this time in our lives? Our call may be Call, with a capital C, where we are at a major juncture in our life - moving towards retirement, or a job change, or making other life changing decisions. But our call may be call, with a lowercase c. The day to day, moment to moment choices we make about how we spend our time, where we focus our energy, our thoughts. Our call may manifest itself in small ways throughout our day - in how we faithfully live the ordinary moments of loving, serving, connecting with those around us. Will still can ask ourselves, am I living the life God desires of me, right here, right now?

*We can choose what we do with the time we are given.* God offers us that freedom. Both John and Jesus went into the wilderness as they grew into the call they received.

My experience personally, and in hearing the stories of others, is that listening and following our call can be disorienting at first. There are so many voices in our world calling to us - so much noise in our own heads. The 'what ifs' can paralyze us - what if the surgery doesn't work? What if I don't find another job? What will I do with my life if I retire? Who would I be if I give up a certain belief about myself? It can sometimes be

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<sup>1</sup> Pat Raube-Wilson, Auburn/Union Theological Seminary  
<http://www.textweek.com/movies/call.htm>

easier to stay small and safe, than take the risk of failure, the risk of following that tug at your heart to step into something different.

On Friday I started my day with an early morning Skype conversation with Leah Lumeya, in the Congo. Most of us know that Leah and Fidele moved to the Congo late this past summer, following the call to bring their skills of peace building and restorative justice work to those back in Fidele's home area. Leah talked frequently about her sense of call as they discerned next steps and prepared to make the move.

Now they've been there nearly 3 months, and the reality of the transition is felt in both beautiful and painful ways. Not speaking the language, not knowing the culture, Leah finds herself being called to be quiet and listen, and listen some more. It's isolating, she's been physically ill. She frames it as a time of learning - hmmm... learning that stretches us to our perceived limits. 'What am I doing here? Why did we come?' Leah is, at times, in the wilderness. And yet she feels the Spirit of God moving in her life. As she sometimes questions her call, she hears God reminding her to keep her eyes on the goal. Keep focused on God, on the people. She senses that God has put her in this place and time to witness to the way God is at work in the people of the Congo.

*"We cannot choose the time we live in. We can only choose what we do with the time we are given."*

I hold that call alongside the psalm we read together earlier. In it we are told to "be still and know that I am God". Be still. Following a call usually requires listening, paying attention. Being still. But not just be still, no - Be still and know that I am God - it's a call to remember we are not God. God is God, here with us. We make mistakes, sometimes we follow paths that in hindsight we wished we hadn't taken. Listening for a

call is messy work. It requires some amount of being still, of quieting ourselves enough that we can hear, and knowing that God is God, in the wilderness with us.

Whether it's a call with a Capital C, or a call with a lowercase c, each of us is called to follow Christ. It may start small - it may be to take some time and work with the repetitive voices in our head that tell us we have to do this, or shouldn't do that. Maybe it's paying attention to the nudge or the energy that stirs, maybe it's acknowledging that we're tired from doing, and need to refocus on our faith through prayer and study.

It's not the what that matters, it's recognizing that we have a choice. God gives us the choice, over and over how we will faithfully live the lives we are given.

*"We cannot choose the time we live in. We can only choose what we do with the time we are given."* What is God calling you to, in this time and place?